

## **Evaluation of the 11th Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference: Exploring Boundaries, Expanding Frontiers, July 2009, Fremantle, Western Australia**

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*Qualitative evaluation of the 11<sup>th</sup> Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference held at the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia showed that the conference was well received, with the atmosphere and diverse themes being appreciated by the 90 attendees. The broad conference topic of frontiers was broken down into four subthemes of crossing borders, removing barriers, driving change and challenging assumptions. The range of papers actually presented reflected the many socially concerned and enquiring voices in community psychology. Attendees appreciated the strategy of pairing keynote speakers with practice presentations, although many wished there had been opportunity for more discussion in the formal paper sessions. To promote action, some attendees suggested widening the net to include non-psychologists such as those involved in framing State and National policy in Australia and in New Zealand, together with broader representation from community agencies and the legal profession. These and other feedback themes are offered as considered input for the next Trans-Tasman conference. Social highlights of this conference were the welcome function held at a local brewery in Fremantle, and the performance of the Spirit of the Streets Choir at the Conference Dinner.*

In 2009, the 11<sup>th</sup> Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference was held at the University of Notre Dame in Fremantle in Western Australia. Local, national and international speakers were invited to attend on topics of community interest, where the overall theme for the conference was “Exploring boundaries, expanding frontiers”. The four listed sub-themes were: crossing borders, removing barriers, driving change and challenging assumptions. ‘Crossing borders’ invites working in diverse settings, applying community psychology in extending areas and learning from this engagement. ‘(Re)moving barriers’ involves barriers involved understanding what hurdles currently impede our practice and how they might be overcome. Driving change suggests questions such as: How do we create change? How do we translate theory to action? What skills do we require? How can training be improved? Where are we headed? The fourth subtheme of ‘challenging assumptions’ is associated with the question of how to turn the lens of serious reflection and questioning onto

our own work.

There is a strong acknowledgement of the importance of social justice value within community psychology (e.g., Fisher, Gridley, Thomas & Bishop, 2008), reflected in training and practice associated with disadvantage and empowerment, including Indigenous concerns, the situation of single mothers, family violence, social health, immigration and community building. As expected, the 2010 conference papers largely reflected these foci and extended into conceptual and developmental issues in community psychology.

The Trans-Tasman series of conferences enables our specialty to celebrate community psychology both here in Australia and also in New Zealand. The conference series began on Pakatoa Island in Auckland in 1989 with an emphasis on experiential learning during the conference and through its activities (Fisher et al., 2008). Active engagement with local social and political contexts was a key background to this experiential learning. There were 90 attendees over the four day period of the present

Table 1  
*Locations and Occupational Context of Attendees*

From WA 26/90 (62%)	From other Aust. States 20/90 (22%)	International 14/90 (16%)
Students 23/76 (30%)	Academic Staff 27/76 (36%)	Practitioners 26/76 (34%)

(11<sup>th</sup>) conference, with affiliations to universities, community agencies, government departments, and private organisations and practice.

This paper describes a formal evaluation of the conference commissioned by the Organising Committee. The evaluation was qualitative, with questions regarding the content and supporting organisation of the conference.

#### Method

##### Participants

Of the 90 attendees, 28 replied to the questionnaire either through hard or soft copy. This yielded a response rate of 31%. Table 1 below shows the characteristics of the whole sample of attendees, indicating that 62% of attendees were from Western Australia. The primary occupation was relatively evenly distributed between student, academic staff and practitioners, based on those 76 participants who gave this information in their enrolment details.

##### Sources of information

Respondents used a two page semi-structured open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix) to organise their responses. In addition, enrolment information was used to determine the characteristics of attendees (see Table 1).

##### Analysis

Although most respondents were relatively brief with their comments, some took the time to write longer entries. The qualitative data were entered on a spreadsheet and thematic content analysis as described by Creswell (2009) was employed. Both researchers initially read all of the questionnaires several times to get an overall

sense of the data, and then identified any biases and questions they had through memoing. Significant concepts, sentences and statements were highlighted.

Both researchers independently reduced the data by coding the material into themes, and then met to resolve any differences in their coding. The responses were cut and pasted, and classified under the different themes. Major themes were then established by grouping together minor themes, and a summary statement was written that described the underlying data. Where possible, quotations from actual respondent returns were used, and these higher level analyses were then written up to form the reported findings.

#### Conference Content

##### Reasons for Attending

Some respondents were regular attendees of the Trans-Tasman conference, with them reporting that “I always attend these conferences – they are my homeplace in psychology”, or “I have a very strong identification with community psychology and want to maintain and develop this connection”. Most, however, were “curious” and “wanted to learn more about community psychology”.

##### Experiences of the Conference

Most respondents considered the group of themes of the conference worked well. One remarked on the “lovely synthesis of perspectives and diverse people. The conference ran smoothly, organisers are lovely. I think Freo facilitates these discussions better than the City, so well picked.” Another said “For me, this was

a dark horse of a conference. I was impressed with the quality of speakers and the organisation of the event.” Yet another “found the themes very relevant to community psychology as it is still evolving. I enjoyed the presentations and found most of them to be very relevant. The mix of practice and theory was great. Keynote speakers were informative and relevant to the Australian context.”

The diversity, scope and variety of content received positive feedback from many. Attendees commented on the “good variety”, “scope of issues”, “attention to diversity”, “diversity of speaker perspectives”, and “breadth of information presented”. One person commented that “the content was interesting and well balanced”, while another said they thought the speakers were “all relevant to current, social issues here and overseas”. Another comment was “The content was very informative and inspiring. The amount and diversity of the content showed all perspectives”, while another respondent wrote “A good cover of themes and diversity of keynote presenters”. One student participant remarked that the conference themes were “very diverse, with a range of speakers not only from Perth or Australia but overseas as well. Good for a student to see the scope”. A representative summary of the positive feedback in this area was the comment “I think (the conference was) just a lovely synthesis of perspectives and diverse people.”

Indigenous and other topics relevant to the region and Australia in general were highlighted in the responses. The theme on Indigenous issues, in particular, was received well with several participants indicating that they “enjoyed the Indigenous focus”. One person attended to “hear about community psychology in Australia and the region” being “particularly interested in the Indigenous issues being discussed”. Others liked the focus on other disadvantaged groups such as the homeless, and young mothers, while others singled out the critical community psychology dialogue as being memorable. Another was surprised to learn that “the *Big Issue* actually does help homeless people”.

One feature of the conference was that all keynote speakers were paired with practice presentations. Attendees liked the “theory, action research, community perspectives, having an overall theme for one day”. Many enjoyed the keynote speakers, with comments ranging from “keynote speakers were fantastic”, “being very informative and interesting”, and “inspirational”. Another commented on the “balance between research and community projects – so theory seen in action!”

Although the larger part of the feedback was positive, as in the examples given, there was also constructively critical and negative feedback. A few found “some presentations to be confusing and not really community psychology”, with others remarking that “some speakers were not acquainted with community psychology”. One suggestion was that a definition of community psychology would have been helpful; another recognised this issue, but considered that community psychology was still evolving.

One attendee stated that “a lot of speakers spoke about things in a narrow focus, which didn’t seem to be easily generalised into larger solutions for community problems, for example, empowerment and resilience. The presenters also seemed to provide their information, but didn’t really have any information on how this could help large groups of people, or help community problems.” Instead, this respondent suggested that topics could be opened up to

*...presenters from differing backgrounds – they mostly seemed to be from psychology or counselling... I would also have set aside positions for people from different backgrounds, for example, government, law, and various community agencies. This would have provided for discussion from people from a variety of contexts and beliefs, and would provide better opportunities for networking. This would also mean that it wouldn’t just be a bunch of*

*psychologists speaking to one another, and may also lead to some sort of action.*

### **Timing, Scheduling and Use of Classrooms**

Several attendees mentioned liking the length of the event and allocation of time between presentations and other activities. Comments included, “sessions were a great length of time”, “length of conference just right”, and “(good) balance of time between keynotes”. However, the length of keynote sessions were identified as a concern, reflected in such comments as “Not enough time left for questions and discussion”, “sometimes the keynote speakers were too long”, “late finishes” and a “longer time for discussion”. Many commented that the experience of shortage of time was common to many conferences. Suggestions included “shorter breaks – starting and finishing earlier” as well as for “better use of time – there was a lot of ‘empty’ time then papers too crammed together”.

There was a consistent theme of the wish to use available time more effectively. Some pointed out that the “classroom and lecture theatre setup was not conducive to group discussion”. The opportunity for constructive and critical dialogue would be improved if such environmental constraints were managed more effectively, through the use of rooms and seating that enabled face to face contact between conference attendees.

The conference had three concurrent streams and a number of attendees felt constrained by the scheduling of concurrent presentations. They remarked that there were “too many presentations and not enough time for them”, “too much good stuff, too little time – maybe two streams not three” and were concerned about “having to choose between sessions – wanted to attend both at the same time but couldn’t”.

Volunteer staff and organisers received positive feedback for on-site assistance, with many comments regarding the “welcoming organisers”, “organising committee – approachable and helpful”, “friendliness and

helpfulness of organisers and volunteers on site”, “helpfulness of organisers and volunteers very good”, as well as “organisers very welcoming and easy to approach”.

### **Networking Opportunities**

The opportunity for networking was well received. The limited number and friendliness of people in attendance was seen as conducive to discussion, as a “fairly small amount of people gave us opportunity to meet more people”, “wonderful opportunity to network”, and “great opportunities for networking! The people were lovely.”

### **Supporting Organisation of the Conference Pre-conference Planning, Email Communication and Website**

Attendees generally thought well of the conference organisation, commenting, for example, that “the whole conference was professionally arranged,” and “thanks... for the hard work that must have gone into the planning. It paid off with a good smoothly-run conference”. The conference contact person received special praise, with many commenting about the “responsive help”, with others saying that her “emails were...thorough”.

Email was reported as an effective method of recruiting potential attendees, with a large majority of the survey respondents indicating they had learned about the conference either via direct email from the conference contact person, an email forwarded from a colleague, or from an email list. Receiving information via email was seen as a benefit, with “email...that included a conference timetable and a Notre Dame map was also good”. Another indicated that emails were helpful providing “guidelines for presentations and updates on the schedule”. One respondent had a different experience, indicating that it would have been “nice to receive an email that specifically stated my registration had been received and processed”.

Many commented on the efficacy of the website, in particular the online booking system and availability of useful conference information. As a positive feature, a number of attendees simply remarked “website”, and others

indicated they learned about the event online via the APS conference website. More feedback included “online registration process was fine”, “the website was informative”, “registration was clear and simple, and similarly, the website was clear and provided sufficient information”, and “the website was well resourced with the required information”.

The positive reactions were not unanimous. Some people commented that the website could have been better, specifically with regard to updating of information during the event as well as comprehensiveness of available information. One person identified as an issue the “lack of updated information about presenters on the website” and another commented “I really wish the website had been continually updated so I could develop a plan of who to see”. Another person suggested a website section separate from conference details, “allocated for just the background of keynote presenters”.

#### **Conference Brochure, Maps and Directions**

Along with the website, the brochure received both positive and negative feedback. Positive comments included “booklet was very helpful” and “brochures were informative”, “well-organised booklet”, and “program booklet very good, good scope of concise information”. One attendee remarked “I thought the little map book of Fremantle and the guide to shops/eating that was included in the registration bag was the best. Also the actual conference guide.”

Some thought that the “conference booklet could have been better organised”. One detailed suggestion was to “organise the text based on the days, not types of presentations, clearly delineating individual papers per session not just one after the other”. Another suggested “a few (blank) pages in the back... to aid in taking notes”.

Directions to the venue could have been improved. One respondent reported difficulty “initially trying to find the venue”, while another reported that they “weren’t sure where to come the first morning”. One out-of-state visitor commented on the difficulty of locating venue buildings for those unfamiliar with the area

adding that they “also knew one WA person who had trouble finding exactly where the first session was on the first day, and they were just coming from the train station”. One respondent suggested that a map beforehand would have been useful, while another suggested a “map of where to go and where to park if driving”. Signage was suggested, as the conference was held within two buildings.

#### **Conference Location and Venue**

Fremantle itself was commented on as “beautiful” and a “lovely location” for the conference. “Region was nice (Freo)” and “I think Freo facilitates these discussions better than the City (of Perth), so well picked.” The proximity of Notre Dame University to public transport was particularly well received, with “fantastic location – close to train”, “conference venue was easily accessible” and “close to shopping area... also very close to train station”.

The use of two separated University buildings received mixed feedback. One positive response was that the “venue was great and applicable to size of conference”, while another indicated that the venue “was challenging with distances between rooms requiring outdoor journey in blustery weather”. Some found “going between buildings a bit annoying”. One person suggested a “different location, with perhaps (a five star hotel) instead”. A need for “warmer temperatures in rooms” was also referred to. Several attendees suggested a venue with dedicated parking or greater provision of information on available parking nearby to the venue.

#### **Food and Catering**

Food and catering received a considerable amount of varied feedback. The welcome function was hailed as being highly successful, with comments ranging from “great venue for welcome function”, “the welcome event was a highlight – very generous provision of good food and drink, wonderful atmosphere”. The Conference Dinner was not as well received, with participants saying that they saw “the meal at the restaurant” as an opportunity for improvement. Another person commented that

the conference dinner was “way too long”. Nevertheless, the musical item provided by the Spirit of the Streets Choir was very well received. Their presentation was seen to bring home the politics of unemployment with particular effectiveness.

Turning to the tea and coffee facilities, several attendees were concerned at the perceived lack of space in the refreshment area, and the lack of seating there. They would have preferred “room with tables for meals, morning and afternoon tea”. Several respondents suggested a dispenser of pre-brewed coffee would be a good idea. Opinions on catering were highly varied: one person commented that “meals were lacking in meat” while another said there was “not enough vegetarian food”. There were predominantly positive remarks, such as “meals good”, “I really enjoyed the food”, “food was great”. One person observed that the food was “not particularly filling” and there were “usually small gourmet kind of things which didn’t help with having energy for concentrating”, while another said “fruit and nuts would have been welcome with not only cakes” at tea and coffee times. More food service points were suggested to ensure that a large number of people were provided with food and drink in the quickest point of time, and reduce the need for prolonged queuing.

### **Reflection on the Findings**

Suggestions included widening the net to include non-psychologists. Although this was done with the successful pairing of keynote speakers with practice speakers, the strategy could have been extended further. Future organisers could consider how a conference might include further opportunities for implementation. Attendees might include non-psychologists, especially politicians, their advisors, and those involved in framing State and Commonwealth government policy, in the law, and in community agencies. It may be necessary to seek such individuals out and invite them to the conference, in a similar manner to what was done for the practice speakers.

Some attendees advised that it would have

been useful to provide a clear definition of community psychology, especially as guidelines to acceptance of conference papers as some questioned whether some papers were examples of community psychology. The difficulty, however, with the question “What is community psychology?” is that such a question problematises community psychology, and in so doing allows us to become part of the problem (see, for example, Albee, 1992; Fryer & Laing, 2008). Moreover, there is the further issue of whose voice becomes dominant as to what community psychology is (Fryer & Laing, 2008).

Such issues are probably best dealt with by discussion at the conference itself, and many of the attendees wished to have more time for it, especially after keynote speakers. Although time for discussion had been intended by the organisers, keynote and practice presentations tended to take up most of the scheduled time. Future conference organisers might wish to consider a formalised discussion period in the program, and indeed potentially within every session of presented papers. Careful selection of conference venue and seating plans would also provide environmental support for discussion, aided perhaps with an opportunity for discussion circles led by individual panel members. This might provide for an active component of professional development in an activity which is often considered to be passive. Moreover, the potential use of discussion circles and their reporting could, for example, be reported as part of the updates on the conference website, and have provided material for a searching, rigorous and authoritative evaluation.

It was unfortunate that only a third of the attendees completed evaluation forms, and this low response rate limits this evaluation. Although the methodology used in this evaluation was qualitative, and so therefore does not need to meet the criteria of representativeness and generalisation, the rigour of the study would have been improved had evaluations been collected from the first session of the conference, rather than conducted on the

third and last day. Administration of the evaluation form was done traditionally (and passively) through collection of written feedback, and a more active strategy of using student volunteers to interview conference attendees throughout the conference would likely yield a higher response rate. Given that a number of participants had to leave the conference early, reminders from session chairs would also be helpful in raising the response rate. This methodological concern has potentially serious repercussions, in that the views and concerns of non-psychologists and others who are interested enough to attend part of a conference are unlikely to be represented using traditional, 'after the event' forms of evaluation as described in this report. The use of more varied and continuous evaluation processes would have improved the rigour and provided potential opportunities for challenging the status quo within our specialty.

With respect to informal discussion opportunities, networking time was well received, although many respondents indicated they would have preferred to have had seating accommodation in the refreshment area to encourage further discussion. The provision of computers within the refreshment area enabled many to catch up with their outside communications, but this tended to preclude active discussion between conference attendees.

Another suggestion made by respondents was that they would have preferred two, rather than three, concurrent sessions. As the conference is small relative to other conferences that are available, they wanted to experience many of the presentations and presenters, and scheduling three concurrent sessions reduced their opportunity to do this. Future conference organisers may wish to reconsider the format of presentation as well as or having more poster sessions to accommodate more involved discussion.

Dr. Lauren Breen was singled out as being especially helpful by conference attendees, and her work was recognised

especially with respect to email contact. The website was valued as part of the pre-conference information, although many respondents would have liked it updated during the conference. This function could be allocated to a member of the organising committee in the future.

Social highlights of the conference were the welcome function held at a local brewery in Fremantle, and the performance of the Spirit of the Streets Choir at the Conference Dinner (see their website at [www.spiritofthestreetschoir.org.au](http://www.spiritofthestreetschoir.org.au)). The location in the port city of Fremantle was well received, although accommodation across two university buildings was challenging to attendees, especially in inclement weather. Many attendees wrote that signage was needed, together with directional maps for attendees, and parking information. Alternately, conference organisers might consider a venue which is centralised, enables break out rooms and includes parking. Should university buildings be considered for a future conference, then consideration should be given to additional heating, as many attendees found the room temperatures too cold.

In conclusion, the responses indicated that the conference was successful, and the general atmosphere and themes were greatly appreciated by attendees. The conference was well received by attendees, who noted the supportive atmosphere and friendliness. The 11<sup>th</sup> Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference will be remembered as enabling celebration and critical reflection on the nature of community psychology and its application to both societies and individuals.

### References

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### **Acknowledgements**

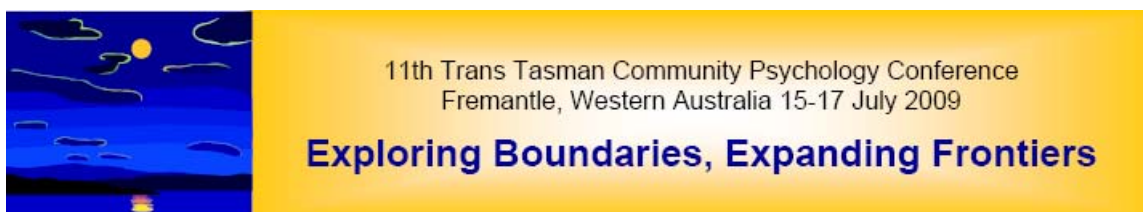
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## Appendix 1: Proforma open-ended questionnaire



### Conference Evaluation<sup>1</sup>

#### Demographic information

1. My country / state of residence

2. My ethnic identity

3. Please tick which best describes your principal role (tick as many as may apply):

Psychologist (registered/prov.reg.)     Psychologist (clinical/clin registrar)

Psychologist (other specialist title)     University staff

Student     F/T paid employment

P/T paid employment     Volunteer

Retired     Currently unemployed

4. Age (years)

Under 20     20 – 40     40 – 60     60+

5. Sex     Female     Male

6. How did you hear about the conference?

7. Why did you attend the conference?

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#### 8 Pre-conference arrangements

(e.g., brochure, registration, website, assistance from organising committee)

What worked best for you?

What worked least for you?

What one thing would you have liked to change?

**Conference arrangements**

(e.g., accommodation, meals, conference dinner, meeting rooms, time for networking, helpfulness of organisers and volunteers on site, length of conference, venue, registration fee)

What worked best for you?

What worked least for you?

What one thing would you have liked to change?

**9. Conference content**

(e.g., reflected scope of community psychology, themes of conference; social diversity issues well represented, presentations linked to social action, content represented applied settings, well organised, suited my needs, informative programme booklet, keynote speakers informative)

What worked best for you?

What worked least for you?

c) What one thing would you have liked to change?

**Overall**

(e.g., overall quality, conference content, value)

What worked best for you?

What worked least for you?

What one thing would you have liked to change?

**Additional comments:**

<sup>1</sup> Please note that we are committed to protecting your privacy. The voluntary information you give us on this form will be treated as confidential, and used to assist the organisers of future community psychology conferences.